CALVERT

Student Publications

CALVERT

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Cover photograph by Pablo Jusem

Sarah Johnson

Aunt Lena

Her fingers waltz
with a needle and thread,
though they are chilled
so deeply the joints curl
inward for warmth.
Her hand,
holding the hoop,
shivers.

But rhythms flame under her skin.
Her face almost remembers
an old song.
She whispers words
that once translated her
into an eagle,
a butterfly,
a stone.

She carries herself
like a basket of eggs,
huddled into herself as if
the least shake
would crack her.
She is faded,
bleached one time too many
and left to dry
in the sun,
wrinkled.

Hoa Nguyen

Little Sister

You slipped the secret of your belly
beneath my bedroom door.
Your usual scrawl pounded
into square shapes, shaping
words that fall like hammers
blunting my fingers.

I dreamt that night
I kicked at puffing balls
angry at the fluff
that only planted seeds.
I grabbed the young yellow ones
and snapped their heads off
one by one.

I didn't even know you had grown
hair between your legs.
The doctor is checking your cervix,
his machine, the writing
that's only scribbles on paper
like a page of my coloring book
you drew on. You always went outside the lines.

Feet trapped, your body
takes the shape of a Y
raked with maroon furrows.
I can only sputter on about riding
horses about flat stomachs

when she slides out

the spray of blood
from the slippery pull of placenta
splatters your gown and
we gaze at the drops
on our clenched white hands.

Kevin J. Craft

Red Lane

The length of a short-cut
between two streets a wall of stone
is coming out of its mortar, facing
a long afternoon.
Watch as rock-climbers
make inroads of its footholds:
they practice hours of ascent, crawling
sideways, craning just above
their height to move a few inches
into place. Each finger,
cramped and taut, roots
the weathered edge of stone, tedious for stay.
The white chalk from their hands
lasts weeks in the cracks, holds longer
than any muscle would approach.
Stopped there at dusk
the light spreads along the wall
like a crowd turned back.

Housewarming

But for each minute the whine
of moon in the trees
and in the yard the dogs
circling the oak trees,
the house is in order.
Every minute more
the neighborhood is aroused.

It is as if just before
sleep the light is turned on
and I hear, and I know
you hear, the voices
not of thieves (you once thought
and were afraid) but of those
cleaning up
from the meal, those guests
rounding the corners of walls
with their compliments, their laughter,
eddies of music taken up
in drifts with the conversation.
The living room swells
to a lungful, its airs circulating
beyond the gist of chatter,
the chance meeting of glasses,
to the prolonged sweep of each second.

Holed up in the rise
of the roof we tug
at the fringes of this world
going on downstairs, listening
as the sphere of voices
moves onto the porch, and then
as motors snarl and trail off
one after the other.

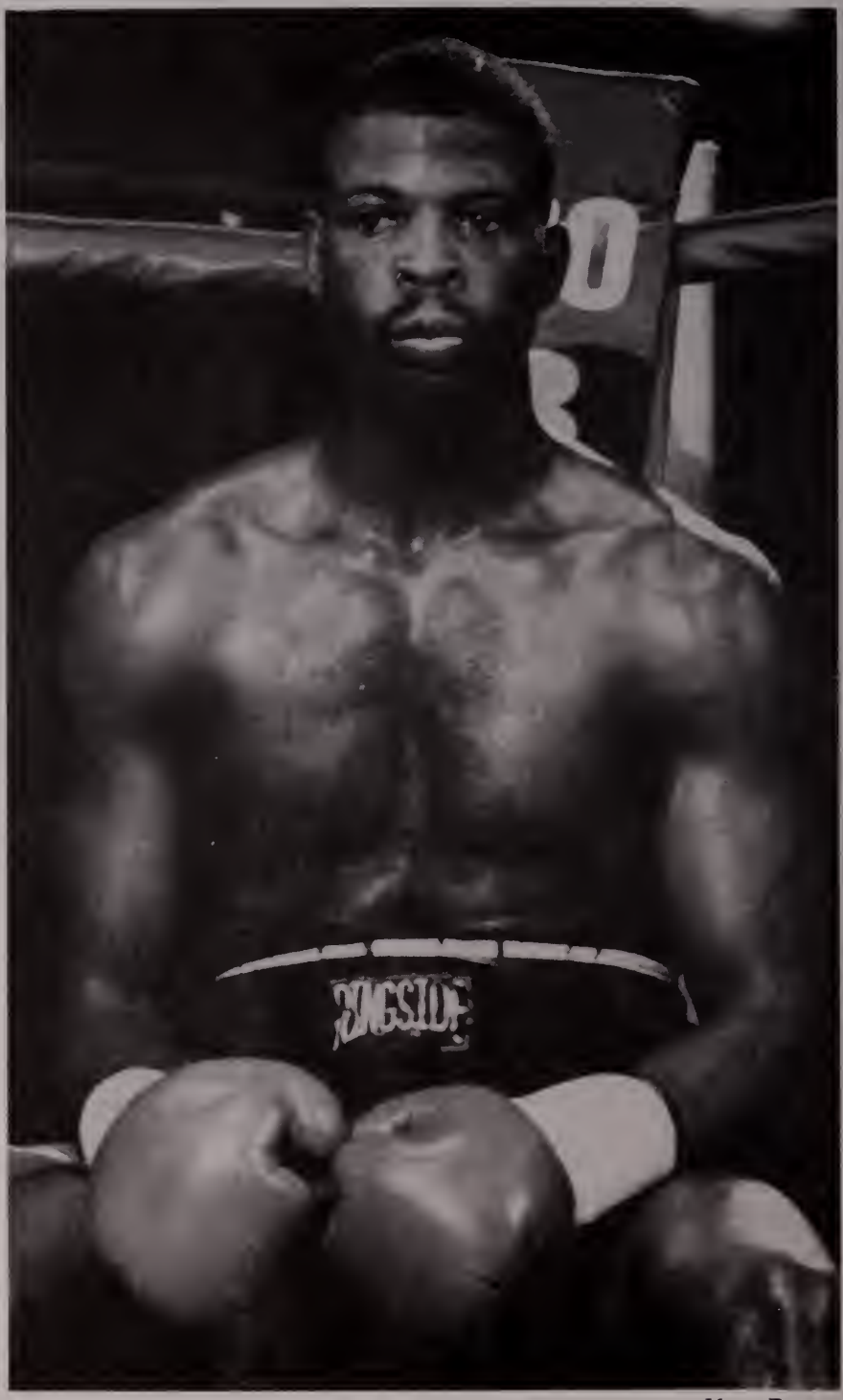
Now the walls are breathless.
By degrees the lamps go dim.
A rumor of quiet spreads all through the place.

M. Andrew Newman

The Abstractest Reason I Ever Used in Ending an Otherwise O.K. Relationship

you
careless airs heiress
imitator
met me cornered talking
to some greenwich village spraypaint
spray—starch artist
dilettante introducing your
cardboard depth text
book art theory
art movement
motionless textural neo—expressionist
expressionless new york school
uncool hot colors brush—stroked
finger painted
poetry and new
perspectives on classical concerto
mahler's seventh
and a fifth of vodka drunk
discussions of marx and friedrich's
leninist potentials
salon socialist didactic speeches
in basement revolutionary dress and
whole nights quoted from
societe anonyme.
and all through six years'
sick—faced wan wasted
artist—looking hungry talks
all I ever really learned from you
was that that german devil—sold
soulless man's name was really
faust
not
goethe

You are not the sunrise
or a spider's web,
no chain—link fence
or chrome
reflection
in a cadillac's bumper
could contain you.



Ken Baron

Seth Silberman

The Death of a Briefcase

Sleep still held firmly his knees and legs and a slow, hard pain crept from the nape of his neck to his forehead still wet from the morning's rain. All morning he had been talking rapidly and loudly, which always displayed his stutter. The talking irritated his throat. He had been talking rapidly and loudly because he had just discovered a new truth about himself: he was lonely and he was horny. And he had no idea how to alleviate either and he and I had just witnessed the death of his briefcase. This was not a good day for him.

He was still talking rapidly and loudly in between bites of his cream cheese bagel when I met him by the Co-op. That's where everyone who talks rapidly and loudly passes the time, he told me. I had noticed it was quite noisy. He had been fondling the brass latches to his black leather briefcase as he spoke of the superior quality of the food the Co-op. He spoke of tofu and beans, weeds and seeds.

He explained to me the joys of vegetarianism and animal rights. Beans and chick peas and other protein sources. Hummus is good but I would never tell him that. He continued to speak of it. He massaged the latch to his leather briefcase as he spoke. He spoke of animal rights and the large animal rights protest he had attended the year prior. His eyes twitched and circled the room as he spoke.

He cleared his throat. Talking irritated it, he told me.

His lips swelled and watered while he played with the latch. He stroked it. He spoke of the slaughter houses and Frank Perdue. And poisoning and steroids. His eyes overflowed with the thrill of combatting the Frank Perdues of the world. Growing with excitement, they told of how we must free these animals while he had ineptly moved one of the numbers of the combination next to the golden latch. While telling me about his great new truth he forced the latch back into the socket. He felt, rubbed, and looked at it as if its golden beauty filled his eyes for the first time.

Later he expained to me that I should learn from this and never stick the latch in the socket unless the number is the set combination. He demonstrated the correct way of latching a brief case with the latch that worked several times before he tried to pry the other open. I could see that sleep had left his eyes to panic.

He was expaining rapidly and loudly that he had to open this briefcase to get to the papers he needed later. His eyes swelled and began to perspire as he attempted to work an old key in between the latch and the hole. He had to get it out. He explained to me, as well as to those who sat at the table next to us, that this key was for a place in which he used to live the year prior. He told me he never threw a key away. He stopped prying and sweating to rummage through his beautiful black leather jacket's pocket to show me his

key ring of keys he no longer used. It was a beautiful jacket and he explained to me that a friend had brought it back from Argentina for him. Those memories registered content behind the frenzy in his eyes. They did not seem as big. They were searching.

He stopped to look into my eyes and told me he could still feel sleep in his knees. It felt like maggots carving steaks from his dead flesh. He could not move them in the morning. In the morning I am dead, he told me.

Then he dropped to the floor and began to madly jab this old key into the slit. He had to get it out. But as he struggled he kept talking about it. And he kept talking rapidly and loudly. And he kept talking about his new truth. And he told me more of his sleep and how it would not let him wake. And while he repeated that he was lonely and horny I decided I would kneel and try to assist him. Everyone was staring and it seemed to be the thing to do.

He mumbled about how much this briefcase had meant to him. Mumbling diminished his stutter. Mumbling was better than talking rapidly and loudly. His key bent as he tried to pry it open. He chuckled to this: a joke I did not understand nor want to know. I could carry everything I need in this, he told me as if he were reading the beginning of a eulogy for his dear departed briefcase. His mumbling made the people next to us stop talking. They couldn't hear him as well. But it stopped in favour of his new truth.

He was trying to explain to me the thing to do about his loneliness and horniness. His eyes glowed with excitement. It seemed that at this point he was truly awake for the first time of the day. But too awake too rapidly. After one confronts the problem one can deal with it, he said just before we had succeeded in prying open and breaking the latch of his briefcase. And with the breaking of the latch, so seemed his spirit to break.

We've just witnessed the death of my briefcase, he muttered. Sleep had once again claimed his body. He sighed in his chair and muttered about being able to get to his papers and books. At least I can do that, he said.

We've just witnessed the death of my briefcase, he muttered as I once again took the seat across from him. He placed his feet on the briefcase. He now spoke of how he had loved the briefcase because of its size. It was a big briefcase. His sadness was briefly raised when he spoke of his new truth. And how it was to change his life. And as he spoke I thought of ways to leave. I hesitated. The way he touched the broken latch nauseated me. I could see him caressing a dead bird his cat had proudly dragged to show him as if by the touching it could live again. And as he spoke, the occassional smile or nod was getting repetitive and his voice was driving a steel pin through my ear drums.

And still he spoke of it rapidly and loudly. His throat hurt and his stutter did not help. St's and d's were difficult sounds for his mouth to utter rapidly and loudly. And yet even his stuttering at such a rate did not embarrass him or cause him to lower his voice. He was competing with the couple who sat two tables down from us near the Coke machine. His body once again became alive with competition.

And then he told me of this new truth and how he would combat it. The meat of it is that I will enjoy life much more with this, he paused searching for that perfect word to make his eyes grow, epiphany. He found it. His

eyes seemed to be on the verge of giving birth. They were blue and quite pretty but I would never tell him that. His hands forlornly fidgeted with the latch and with themselves. As he explained how he was to fight it I noticed his foot tapping to some unknown rapid beat.

He was to fight this new truth and it was to guide him in re-evaluating his unhappiness. And help improve his self- and body-image. I immediately thought of what he would look like naked. And in love. And having sex. And I wanted to tell him that I really had to leave but I hesitated.

He told me of this last new truth: the size of his nose does not matter. He thought it was too small. He learned that he should be happy with himself the way he is because he is not going to change. And this released so much tension. He had to get it out. This change in his thinking helped his posture.

And this revelation helped his new truth come about to help him change. His eyes bulged again when he spoke of this change. He fiddled with the broken latch on his briefcase. His thighs twitched. He spoke of love and I quickly decided that it was imperative for me to leave immediately. When I told him I had class and had to run he was very polite and once again very asleep. His eyes were their normal size. And before I left after I stood he looked at me awkwardly as if he wanted to ask me a question that would begin with an "st" or a "d."

"I'm really embarrassed, but I've forgotten your name."

"My name is Zachary," I confirmed. "And yours?"

"My name is Jonathan."

He again looked at me with that "st" or "d" look.

"Well if you ever want to talk, you can find me here by the Co-op."

I smiled and tried to leave but hesitated because he started a new sentence.

"Well, I should be off to the library, but maybe I'll eat. I think I'll wait around for a while to see what develops."

I was nervous. "He who hesitates is lost."

John-Francis Ross

For One Left Standing

Tonight, after you have changed
my bed twice, after you have taken
away the mashed food I can't eat,
and have read me the prayers for this day,
before you sit down,
tired from bearing my weight,

and you need me to speak just one word
to color this grizzled gray,
to bring back the time
I begged you to leave and not watch,
to recall why you begged me
not to kill the body, blithely

ceding like an incontinent fool,
when you have forgotten the second
we pledged to go by this route,
when you can't stand the smell anymore
or my grunts, my tears, or the rasp
of my breathing,

go to the drawer of the desk,
take out the words I wrote while brooding
our burden, believe that deep in this broken brain
one synapse still burns with your words,
"Together we shall break
out of this hell."

Pre-Elegiac Questionnaire

(For Matthew)

What is your question?

Will tree-orange and
leaf-yellow crinkle in my hand
again?

What are you afraid of?

Shall I flame steady,
slow like a sanctuary lamp
glowering in ruddy glass, guarded
by sealed church windows and
shuttered doors? Shall I burn in
even increments, parcelling steady
moments of my wax, waiting,
waiting, waiting, until
the last liquid limb is gone?

What other choice do you have?

I could play a prodigal,
expose myself to gust and gale,
burn quick, then slow, one side
tall, the other short. A flame
blazing boisterous, wasting,
wasting, shimmering,
shining to all until
all poured out.

Don't you think your chances are rather poor?

Wind that blows to blow me
out, blow sand in me that gives
each rainbow fragment to my
flame, each rain drop drop oil
that bursts, sparks, spatters
wickedly around my wick. Let
night stars dim-drown in my
light; let sun fade faint in
the furious fastness of my end.

Pablo Jusem

Mariana Almeida

Fifth Day

I wonder if it would not be Waiting,
because things like that happen
in this life.

Pregnant; the word shivers in my mouth.
(If you are not now you never were)
It means carrying a child with you
in your stomach that is a pocket
until it grows for nine months.

Could I have known . . .
skyclad with him making
love
Because silently they meet,
our two halves.
(so deep inside that the
thunder cannot be heard)

Mistakes be made
where only angels dare tread
(not fools, not fools).
O, spidery web of life,
reject me, pass
through me,
leave
your web
over some other
woman's pulsing wrists
tonight.

Ken Jacobs

You Love

as a first grader
finds an egg
in a tree and wraps
it for show-and-tell
to impress.

Wrapped against the cold
coming on,
you hold it close
to your belly
to incubate, if the word
incubate were known.
Not knowing
the honor of spartan boys
and eggs long past raising
and of mothers
not returning to the nest
once defiled, and questions
as to what a baby bird eats.

R. Cooper

Aimee Atland

from *The Auction*

Aimee Atland rose mornings
taste of trees in her dreams.
It was the mornings without climate
that made her stop loving,
the thick, invisible soup of hay
surrounding, penetrating, stopping the mind.

The tepid daisies she tended past the porch
could never survive the cruel elements:
lazy dogs, brains melted;
the stomping shoes of her boys;
Merle who would pick them and silently vase them.

Aimee Atland spent her days
among red lace and sheet music,
wild afternoons filled with preperations.
The occasional visitor caught outside
the arching sun, passing along horizons.

The Criminal Moon Drags Its Weight Along

from *The Auction*

The criminal moon drags its weight along
  and escapes in the veins of every splintered husk.
The deep cuts of land bleed through hills
  that mark the edges of the earth,
  map its finite boundaries.
Every road in Carrol County is empty
  and oblivious to movement,
  the gad of midday's shoeless girls
  stringing clovers into chains.
The subtle whisk of droplets on every tine of hay
  is a music of unending sorrow.
In the dark howl of swaying trees
  there are vines unpleating
  themselves from wet bark.
The alkyd crust of iron pickets. The black
  gate in the blackberry bramble.
The fugitive moon dragging its shade along,
  breeding fear of cellar, garret.

iza DRUGS
17 DAYS TILL MIDNIGHT

M. Andrew Newman

Adam Walderman

Mister Wiles

i've heard your muddy voice, mr. wiles,
moaning its puddle soaked blues and cold
windy busstop rain.
all board the stinking diesel,
and you keep on waiting.
your bootbottoms skin the walk
through streaming rush hour madness;
storm clouds your swirling armadillo eyes
and faded tattered rainbows.

i've seen your jagged face, mr. wiles,
greeting cabs and yellow curbs,
sucking that crusty pipe empty
hope-smoked dust-filled
and barren
staring into empty windows and waiting
wanting some bread and cottage cheese
from somebody's sunday brunch
and whistle broken bible psalms
to feathered heads cocked in the trees.

i've touched your splintered hand, mr. wiles,
knarred old oak soaked in afternoon gin,
weeping cigarette butts clutched in fingers
that cannot bend.
a coffee coin tumbles to an open throat grate
where puerto rican sergios
wrapped in greasy ethnic brown hablo in the streets
smooth and cold as your missing teeth
waiting to chatter to the broken feathered heads
that cock themselves upon peeling facades.

Jackie Neale

Purpose

I want to enter your sleep
any way I can.
I want to enter your soft
brain and mold scenes
that you might remember.
I want to climb vein cobwebs,
dance light to capillary tunes.
I want to slide smooth skin,
be wrapped bandage
tight. I want to be your
pulse, like slow kisses.
I want to stretch in your
soft cheek and ease stubble
out in strong candle wicks
to light your face with colour
in uneven flicker.

Viviane Moritz

Nancy Surprenant

Dolls

My Aunt Jeannette I knew
for the ever-changing tint of her hair
from pink to baby blue and back.
And for the collection of German mechanical
dolls she sent me on my ninth birthday.
They arrived in a glass case
protected from the ill-effects of air
and light, and when I wound them
they performed, slowing only as the pins loosened
in the small of their wooden backs.

One sat in front of a mirror
applying rouge to her reddened cheeks,
her glassy blue eyes still
beneath perfectly arched brows.
One pushed an empty black baby carriage.
Another poured tea into cups on a tray
she held before her for imaginary guests.
There were ten of them and all
wore the same expression
of startled restraint,

their complexions fired to a dull lustre
corpse-like with the inappropriate makeup
the lurid orange lipstick.
Their complicated getups of corset,
pantaloon and bustle. The swaddling
velvet and brocade dresses.
Their maker's name burned
into the soles of their diminutive feet.

I was afraid of them.
They reminded me of my aunt,
how she'd spend even the hottest August afternoons
sitting on the swinging loveseat on her porch
wearing a shawl. How she saved everything,
old mayonnaise and Gerber's bottles,
the leftover grease from Sunday's bacon,
newspapers from the big war

the war of her husband and the husbands of her friends
and sisters, just in case.
How he had never returned.
And how she prayed for brush fire.
She called me on my birthday
her voice sounding muted and distant
as though she were speaking underwater
or from behind glass.

Jennifer Sainato

Your Children Were Not Sacrificed

I think of you
as you were in the kitchen
swaying to brain melodies.
My eyes would follow
the sine wave motions
of your hips.

Over sour mugs of iced coffee
we'd unbotton our chests --
my fingers hesitating on
unsmoothed agate
your hands caressing apples.

Through dirty windows
we'd stare into the sun
and see the faces of children
we could never conceive --
their bodies shining in blue
and orange after-images,
the skin on their faces
drawn tight and pale.

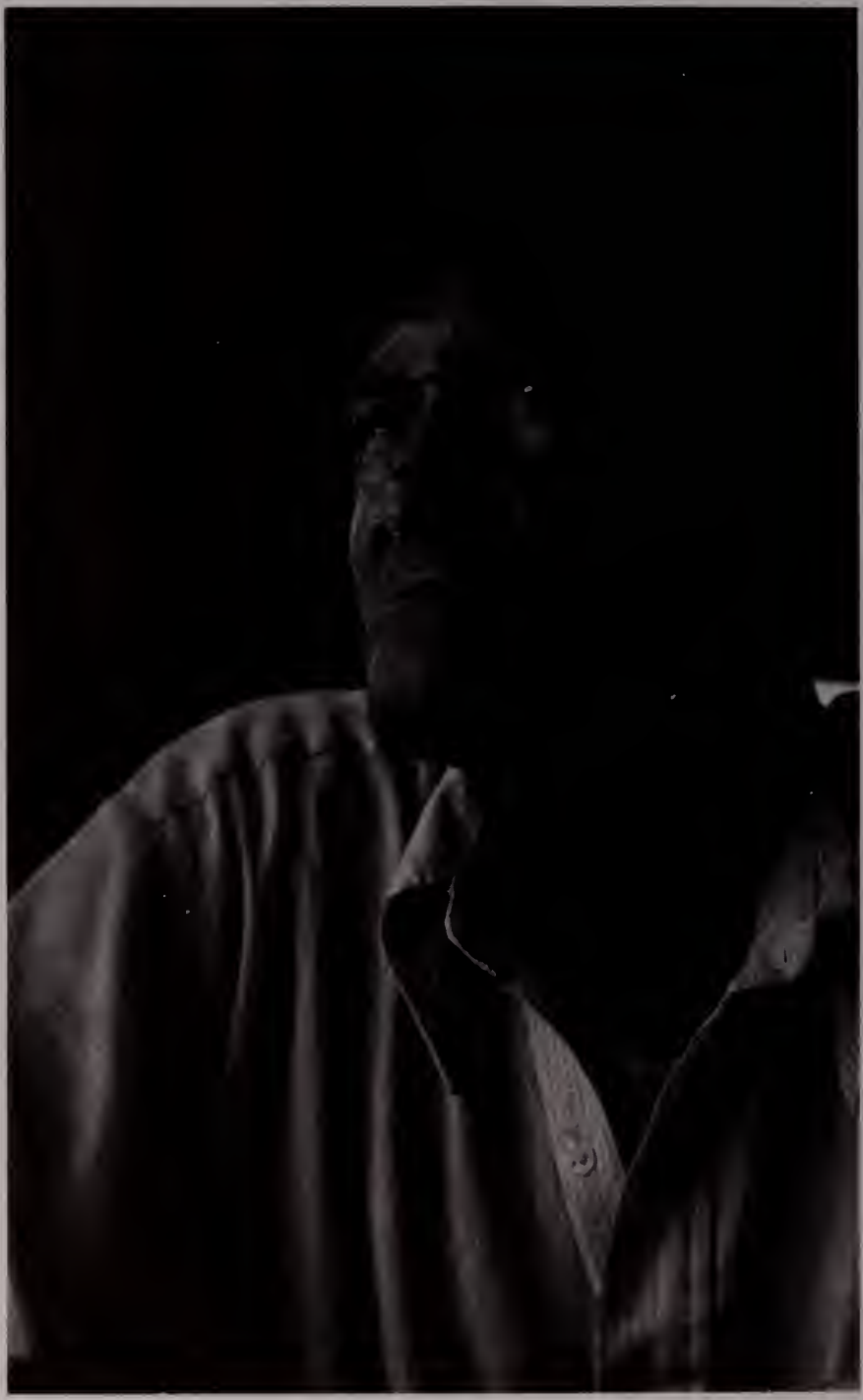
We made no sacrifice.

Before doctors
midwives placed the afterbirth
in a shoebox
tied it with the bloody cord
and burned it in the attic.

You too burned
everything you touched;
poured coffee for no one,
sang only for yourself.

Driving to Meet My Mother

I never really left you.
Here in this hand
this cheekbone
this skirt you wore
before you bottomed out
in white wine
and not enough success.
I dream like you,
Mother,
of dark men
and darkened rooms
that turn our ovaries to ice.
In each scar
I see me
curled and grasping
my scars
your scars
running down my stomach
deliquescing
into small hairs
where you gave birth to me.
Where I'll give birth to you.
In you
all points meet.
All my roads converge
in your body.



Pablo Jusem

Phoebe Brown

Coffee *or* A Pier

"Excuse me, but somehow I just can't see you in a convent."

Alex, quit snapping at me. "Bless you, my child."

"I'm serious."

"In truth, neither can I. I don't think they'd smile fondly on me. Perhaps I should join a bizarre cult and give birth to the Anti-Christ."

"I don't think that's like, a very good plan, Janine."

"My dear Alex, I am only joshing."

"I'm not. I bought into this celibacy bit at first, but it's gone on too long."

"Change the subject, Alex, or I will hang up on you."

Achtzehn hundert sechzehn. In Deutschland haben wir... This man is tedium personlified. I know her; she was in my medieval lit class. Doubt she remembers me. Good grief, that woman is taking notes in shorthand. Don't lean over; she'll notice. Hm. Tight jeans. Now I have something to alleviate my boredom. Ugh. Preppy shirt...Ach, du meine liebe. Welcher Mann.

Schiller war ein neuer...

Wow, what a wunderkind. Hitler would have paid big bucks to get his hands on those genes. I'll bet dozens of women would pay big bucks to get their hands on those jeans. Looks like an animated statue. A statue, anyway. Hasn't even blinked once. He must be made out of plastic. I'll bet he's an android. And his hair is green! Green as Easter grass. Bet he's sensitive as all get-out about it. How does it stay combed like that? Eight pounds of mousse that turns his hair funny colors? Genetic mutation? He's probably been swimming. Maybe his hair is wet. And green and shiny. With vivid comb marks going straight back. Looks like the hair that's painted on male mannequins. He is an android! All right, you can't fool us. You'll never take earth with green-headed androids that don't blink.

Neunzehn hundert fünfzehn. Wahrend den Weltkrieg...

Taking notes like a madman. Very serious. What's he doing in there? Native German? No, he doesn't know the language that well; he's concentrating too hard. Outside interest? Hobby? No, he probably has the standard undergrad hobbies: drinking and women.

Natürlich glauben wir dass...

Oh, natürlich. Mais d'accord. I suppose it could be his major. Why haven't I seen him around? Certainly noticeable. Looks more like an econ major. Or a banker. Or a lawyer. Moves his lips when he reads. Either he's really into it or he's really stupid. Probably stupid. Inverse proportion theory. Stupid, boring and/or egotistical. How's that for a sweeping generalization?

"Are you going to take Alex's place at the *Gazette*?"

"Justine, Justine. Are we back to that? I know you just want to be able to boss me around."

"Come on, Janine. We could really use you."

"For what--a mascot? I'd only hold back the Gestalt."

"Stop being ornery."

"Justine-baby, you want me, you got me." Surprised I gave in that quickly? Sorry, the scenery on the walkway distracted me. Don't turn around and look. Tsk. Thanks. Well, it's what I get for staring. "That is one gorgeous man."

"They all look the same to me."

"I meant objectively. The way I notice women. I used to stare at this woman in my math class. She was one of those delicate Oriental women who look like if you turned them upside-down you'd see 'Made in Japan' on the bottom of one foot. Breath-taking. I thought about telling her: 'Pardon me. I just wanted to tell you that you're breath-taking.' But I figured she'd think I was bizarre."

"Janine, you are bizarre."

"Die. Don't you ever admire attractive men?"

"Yes, I do. You just took me by surprise."

"Oh. Well, it wasn't a random comment. I mean, I haven't taken up guy-watching on the walkway. I've seen him before; he's in my German class. I don't want to talk to him--I don't even want to know his name. But I love watching him."

"The back of his head was nice."

"Actually, his hair's green. Shows how carefully you notice. All right, cigarette break is over. Monday at 1:00 on the stairs. Be there or be square."

"Your earring is falling out."

"Oh. Danke." Some enchanted evening...la da da da da da...Oh good, now it's out entirely. My my my--there he is. This late? Doesn't he have a home? He heard me say he was gorgeous, and now either he wants to see if I'll talk to him or he's checking out the latest fan. No, he's probably meeting someone. Or lives on campus. Or takes night classes. And is just passing time appreciating the January heat-wave. Still, I don't think I'll stop right here in front of him to play with my earring. I'll put it on in the car.

"Debbie, I don't know why I trudge all the way up these stairs to be hassled by you. I should be reading Goethe. Hm. Maybe that's why I'm up here talking to you."

"I thought you liked that German stuff."

"Not this stuff. First of all, the professor is babbling in a foreign tongue about German history from about eight million B.C. to 'place the poets.' Secondly, the first half of the semester is being taken up by twits like Goethe. The eighteenth century twits. They're all so bloody complacent. Give me Kafka any day."

"Poor thing."

"Hush, you. Actually, it's not so bad. I've been keeping myself entertained."

"How?"

"Oh, you know, appreciating the finer things in life. Smelling the roses. Admiring the scenery. Eh, Justine?"

"You know how Janine is about green things: plants, flowers, hair ..."

"Hair?"

Is this bugging you, Debbie? "A blonde godling has descended from the heavens and landed in my German class. So I stare at him like a lobotomized hypnotist. I'm sure he thinks I'm incredibly bizarre."

"You are incredibly bizarre."

"Oh, very good: unison! Did you practice together?"

"What does this have to do with green hair?"

"Justine is just laughing at my expense. And his hair isn't green anymore." Must've quit swimming. "Blonde as blonde can be. Beauteous. Just like Apollo." This is really digging into you, isn't it? You're not used to this from me. "A veritable godling."

"As long as he keeps his mouth shut."

"All right, Justine. Let's not make snap judgments. Although it is true that he spells writer with two t's. I could do without that."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Hopelessly preppy, too. And undoubtedly an S.O.B. But what the hell; I'll just take him home, ravish his body in fourteen different positions, and then throw it in the dumpster. Now if you all will excuse me ... Deutschklasse."

"This man was, like, everything hateful about academia incarnate. He made me remember why I didn't go to graduate school. He, like, leaned across the table, touched me lightly on the arm, and said, 'What other languages do you read in?' "

"No way!"

"Janine, I'm, like, totally serious."

"Did you say, 'Never end a sentence with a preposition'?"

"No, I said, 'Excuse me, I think you're going to have to leave now.' "

"Alex ..."

"So later he said--and get this--'Do you want to do something sometime?' "

"Oh, no. 'Yes I do but not with you.' "

"Exactly. I mean, that is, like, the most cruel, inhumane thing you can do to a person. It leaves one with the big option of saying, 'Why yes, that would be splendid'--"

"Or, 'No, I'd rather hammer my thumb all night than spend another waking moment in your presence.' "

"Precisely. I, like, cannot deal with that question. I mean, how do you say, 'Excuse me, I think you're really inappropriate'?"

"Excuse me, I think you're really inappropriate? Excuse me, I think you're really inappropriate? Ooh, my sides hurt. You're right, Alex; you cannot deal with the question. What does that mean? 'Hey baby, wanna dance?' 'Excuse me, I think you're really inappropriate.' "

"Okay, okay. From now on I'll just ask the expert. 'Hey baby, wanna dan--where'd she go?' "

"Touché. As a matter of fact, you'll love this. There's a gentleman in one of my classes who is excrutiatingly beautiful."

"Excrutiatingly beautiful?"

"Yes. So the other--"

"What is excrutiatingly beautiful?"

"Helen of Troy. Maud Gonne. The kind of person that you look at and think, 'If you do not make love to me within the next five minutes, my body will collapse from entropy, dry into dust, and blow away.' "

"Indeed?"

Dig the astonished tone. "I didn't say I was interested; I just said he was attractive. Although it is nice to know that I'm capable of noticing such things again."

"Indeed?"

"Will you shut up? Anyway, I think he's noticed me noticing him, so I've taken to waiting for him to leave class so that he won't talk to me."

"That's good progress."

"Who asked you? So the other day he leaves, and I start to walk out, and he comes back. He's just standing there blocking the doorway, and he says, 'Sorry,' and proceeds to make no attempt to move out of the way. You should hear this guy's voice, Alex. It's soft, like...like rich German wine."

"That is, like, entirely too corny for words."

"Please die. So I just hang there like a rabbit staring into the headlights of an on-coming car; then I mumble, 'Hi'--how's that for a non-sequitur?--push past him, and smash into the guy walking down the hall behind him. The guy's books scatter all over the hall; I whirl in a 270 and flee down the corridor."

"Red hair trailing behind you. Janine's back in action! And you, like, wonder why you've been celibate so long."

"I certainly do not; it's self-imposed. Look, Alex, I have an exam tomorrow. Call me when you're free and we'll actually do something together. In person, like. I'm not sure I'll still recognize you, but..."

"Okay, okay. You're funny. Maybe next week. Jan? I love you."

"I love you too, Al."

My nude body lies across the bed. My feet are at one corner, my head at the corner opposite; my arms are perpendicular to the torso, my forearms drape down either side of the bed. It is too hot for any part of my body to touch another. The nine-inch fan is just feet away, blowing across my back; the window is open. The rush of cars through the wet streets comes and fades like waves on the beach. The lone stream of air from the fan lifts my hair, caresses the tiny hairs on my back. I imagine long, beautiful fingers trailing lightly across the skin, and I squirm.

Well, well, if it isn't the godling himself. His eyes appear particularly blue today. What's that look for? "Watch our backs, Debbie. I don't know what I did this time, but it looks bad."

"Huh?"

"Hey babe, you could close your eyes and pretend I was somebody else? Just a suggestion. Come back here, Debbie; he didn't hear me. Come back, you coward."

"Who was that?"

"The blonde godling himself."

"Really?"

"Craning your neck won't help. He's gone."

"You have to point him out next time."

"Okay. 'There! Right there! Mr. Godling, Sir, could you hold that pose?' "

Cold. It is cold, I am cold, it is cold, I hate cold. How dare they kick smokers off the stairs! Fire hazard indeed. I refuse to spend the rest of my undergraduate career in this tacky coffee room. This is unconstitutional. I'm writing my congressman. I'm freezing my-- Whoa! The android himself. Don't look over your shoulder; there's nobody there. He's lookin' at you, kid.

"Hi, how are you?"

"Cold, like everyone else on this bloody campus."

Score two points for rudeness. Going to get his coffee; can't say as I blame him. How are you? Nobody says that anymore. Still, doesn't seem like a particularly difficult question. 'Fine, thanks, and you?' I guess this is where he hangs out. No wonder I haven't seen him. Hm. Coffee's almost ready. Give me someone to talk to; don't make me talk to him. Thank you, powers that be--"Debbie!" Calm down. Worst case scenario: he strikes up conversation. No problem. I can make conversation. 'Fine, thanks, and you?' Ah well, she's coming in anyway.

"Debbie-baby! How's it going?" What is he doing back there? I can feel him behind me, listening. I'm paranoid; he's just fixing his coffee. Stir, stir, stir. Go away. "This weather is totally screwed. Do you know what the temperature is? Nineteen fucking degrees." I know that look. That's the vacant look. Please, this is not the time to be emotionally absent. Say something. Be emotionally absent in two minutes when this man goes away. Go away. Go away. "I'm thinking, 'If they just don't tell me how cold it is, I'll be fine. Mind over matter.' Sure enough, I get in my car (don't tell me the temperature; just don't tell me, and I'll be okay), and I turn the key, and the radio announces, 'Yes, it's nineteen degrees outside'; and I think, 'Oh my God, I'm cold!' And here I am, in a jacket and a T-shirt..." I am babbling like a brook. Please stop gaping at me and say something. Say something witty and clever. You are often witty and clever. Now is a good time to be witty and clever. What is he putting in that coffee--illegal drugs? How long does it take to fix a fucking cup of coffee?

"Yes, my flowers had just come up because of the heat, and now it's snowing on them and they're all dying."

Well, that wasn't witty and clever, but it's a start. Man, is she dazed. "It's always fun watching things die." Why am I laughing? This is not funny. Stop gaping at me. All right, I don't drink coffee, but I know it doesn't take this long. What is this--grow your own? Go away. Go away or I will strike

you. I think I'm going to be sick. There goes the lid...he's moving...please don't talk to me...he's leaving. Very slowly. Saying 'Hi' to...Justine?

"Hello, Janine, Debbie."

"Hey, Justine. How do you know him?"

"Who? Him? He's in my class. He talked to me this morning. Probably because we both get here early."

"Mm. He talks to everyone, actually. He's very friendly." Unfortunately. "Which knocks out 'Vain S.O.B.' and leaves either 'Stupid' or 'Boring.' I have my money on 'Boring.' "

"He's the blonde godling?"

"Huh? Where?"

"Oh, hang it up, Debbie. You missed him again."

"Oh, babe, I love the way you move." Keep 'em rolling in the aisles. He provides me with good material, anyway. Actually, I do love the way he moves. Underwater choreography. How does he walk that slowly without falling over? I think the android needs a jump-start. My, what blue eyes he has. Trained very pointedly on Justine rather than me. The better not to see you with, my dear.

"Hi."

Yes, it's that knife-in-the-back look again. Lookout kid/It's something you did/God knows when/But you're doin' it again..."Love you too, babe. What are you laughing at, Justine? Do not be fooled. He is simply so awed by my presence that he cannot bring himself to speak to me."

"Perhaps you should be more direct."

"Perhaps I should hurl myself at his feet and beg him to let me be his love-slave."

"I suppose you could try it."

Perhaps I should stop treating him as though he has the plague.

Square my trial to my proportioned strength. In, out. 'Fine, thanks, and you?' Well, I'm one up on him anyway; I didn't just spill my coffee on my shoe.

"You taken out stock in this coffee room?"

Yes, I love sitting in an unheated room in February. No, not voluntarily. Nobody here but us fire hazards. "I guess I'm a creature of habit." An answer's an answer. No. Cease, stop. Put the book aside. Put it to one side. Very good; now look at him. This won't hurt a bit.

"Do you know what time it is?"

Did I just expend all that mental energy for that? Subtract four minutes. Four. From forty-four. Makes what? Fine. Just mentally move the big hand four spaces back..."1:40. Approximately. I always set my watch ahead so I'll occasionally be on time."

"What were you reading?"

I didn't think this would be that easy. All right, what was I reading? Great, I have to check. "Uh...Sartre. *La Nauseé*."

"Any good?"

"If you like that sort of thing. Beats the hell out of Goethe."

"You don't like what we're doing in class?"

"I don't like that period in general. German or otherwise. I take it you like Goethe?" I know damn well he does; I've memorized his enrapt expression.

"He's not bad."

"Someone has to like him, I guess. Is German your major?"

"Comp Lit."

"Oh! Me too. What are you going to do with it?"

"Go to law school."

I knew it, I knew it. "You look like a future lawyer of America."

"It's not any love for the law. It's marketable."

Good grief. Marketable, no less. Did you vote for Bush?

"Hi, John."

Ooh, what silken tones. I wonder if she practices with a tape recorder.

"What a piece?"

"Uh...okay, thanks."

I'll give her money if she finger-feeds it to him. I'll give anyone money who will give me a way to bow out of this. Introduce myself? Too awkward; I can just tell she won't be receptive. Go back to reading? I've snubbed him enough already. Pretend I have to go somewhere? Class is in ten minutes; where would I be going?

"Hi Janine."

"Debbie-baby!" You win the bozo button, the Mickey Mouse watch, and the hand-crafted leather suitcase with the twelve Puertoricans stashed inside. "What's up?"

"Did you drop the classics course?"

No, I simply felt like not attending the first few weeks. "Oh, first thing. I didn't even go the first day."

"I wish I had dropped it. You should see what we're reading."

"I know what you're reading. That's why I dropped it." Hm. The chick split. "Debbie, this is John; John, Debbie."

"Hi, how are you?"

His pet intro.

"Do you like Freud?"

That's the good thing about Debbie. Only she can come up with a worse answer to 'how are you' than I.

"What class is this?"

"Freudian Review of the Classics."

"Sounds interesting."

"I hate Freud. I want to strangle Freud."

Debbie, Debbie. Do me a favor and don't do anything too off-the-wall. "That would be a touch difficult. Were you planning on digging him up first?"

"Yes. I'll dig him up, and then I'll strangle him. I want to hurt him. I want to put my hands around his throat..."

Hoo-ee! Are we making John uncomfortable. He's pacing. He wants to leave.

"I think I'll go to class and park myself."

Can I read people or what?

"Yes, I should be go--ouch!"

Thank you, Debbie; you're a master of subtlety. "Okay, see you in class." Not you, Debbie; you and I don't have class. Together, that is. Come back here. Come here! I'm sure he's not noticing any of this. "You're ruining my love-life."

"Oh! Was that him?"

"Mm."

"Why didn't you tell me to leave?"

"Oh.'Go away, Debbie.' I'm sure he wouldn't have found that odd."

"But I was trying to leave!"

"I know! Good grief, woman, I'm kidding. You can't ruin my love-life; I'm celibate, remember? You asked me to point him out; I'm pointing him out. Now is he a godling or what?"

"I didn't see him."

"What? But I just introduced you!"

"You should have told me and I would have noticed."

" 'John, this is Debbie. Debbie, this is the blonde godling.' How could you not see him? You were speaking to him!"

"That makes me mad. Now I really want to see him."

"Go, go. I know you're late."

"Next time, point him out."

"Next time I'll carry a sign."

"Hi. What's new?"

"Nothing exciting."

"Oh. That's too bad."

Too bad? I thought 'nothing exciting' was a standard response. Go back to 'how are you.' I've got that one down. "I don't like excitement."

"You don't?"

"No, I prefer to be bored."

"Oh."

Stop staring at me as though I were metamorphosing into a small burrowing creature before your very eyes.

"I like excitement, myself."

Toe-to-head scan, my best Rula Lenska voice: "You know, John, that doesn't surprise me in the least."

"What's wrong with that?"

Maybe I should have put my money on 'Stupid.' Why is he pacing? Did I ask him to come over here and talk to me? No. If he doesn't stop, I'll run spikes through his feet.

"I'm going to get my coffee."

Good plan. Don't go away mad. Just go away.

The man in the coonskin cap/In the pig pen...Well, well, well. Three holes in the ground. "Are you following me around?"

"Absolutely."

Absolutely. Ach, I am smitten. If you follow me home, can I keep you? Take my money off 'Stupid' and put it on 'Frightening.' Eh? I heard that

hallucinatory voice mutter something. Walks underwater, talks underwater...maybe he's a merman. Probably all in my head...Wants eleven dollar bills/You only got ten...

Water rushes through the level below the stairs, and my friends have all left, screaming through the flood. Silence pervades, broken only by the clip swish, clip swish of John's hands as he swims in the murky water. I dive from the stairs and wade toward him. He stands, hair matted, body dripping with years of sludge from the bottoms of people's shoes. I dive again and begin to emerge in front of him. He reaches forward, grasps my left shoulder, places his other hand on my back. He pushes me back under and holds me there.

"Hello, Janine. Is there a reason you're sitting here curled up like a potato bug?"

"Go away, Justine. I'm busy dying of embarrassment."

"This ought to be good."

"John comes out of the building, and I say, 'John! What are you doing here?' And he says, 'What do you mean, what am I doing here?' I say, 'You don't have a 2:00 class today.' And he says, 'How do you know that?' At which point I realize I've stuck my foot in it. So I say, 'Well, it's not like I have your schedule memorized'--which, of course, I do. And he shoots me this look and says, 'I'm really late; I gotta go.' Justine, it's not that funny."

"You memorized his schedule?"

"Not on purpose, no. He told it to me, and I got it on the spot. Me and my elephantine memory. Now he thinks I'm green and scaly with a soft white underbelly and a twelve-foot tail that lashes behind me when I walk."

"That's so cute!"

"Cute? I'm lapsing into rigor mortification, and you think it's cute? 'I'm really late; I gotta go.' "

"He did have to go: away from you."

"Thank you, Justine."

"I thought you weren't really interested."

"I'm not. I wasn't. I was reconsidering. Something about him ... something ..."

"It's all that green hair."

"That must be it. Actually, I had decided this very morning not to revoke the ole 'vow o' celibacy' for him--assuming I would ever have to make such a choice. So I was feeling a little more comfortable around him, and I just said whatever came to mind. That'll teach me."

"Why did you decide that?"

"What? Oh, I don't know. I need to talk to Alex."

"You can talk to me."

"I wouldn't know where to start."

"You look pretty miserable."

"I'm not miserable, just tired. I was up all night. I kept dreaming that John was trying to kill me."

"Sounds complicated."

" 'It's not like I have your schedule memorized.' What possesses me to say these things? I'm glad you're so incredibly amused."

"I know you're not really upset. You're just playing it up to be a ham."

"It was a really stupid thing to say, though."

"I wish I could argue with you."

... hat er ihn so schrieben. Bis Freitag.

The flowers that bloom in the spring--tra la!--have nothing to do with the case. Pshaw. What a--why, hello, my godling; and what can I do for you?

"Are you any good at grammar?"

"Actually, yes."

"I was trying to translate this last night, and I kept screwing up the dative and the accusative. Will you help me?"

Babe, I will climb every mountain, ford every stream..."Sure."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"I really appreciate it."

"It's my pleasure."

"Thanks a lot."

Thank me again and I'll strike you.

"Are you busy now?"

"I have to go to the *Gazette* office, but you can come with me if you like."

"Thanks."

Good grief, man, I'm not bailing you out of jail.

"Where are we going?"

"Next building. It's a two minute walk. Hm. Better make that a four minute walk."

"I know. I walk crooked."

"I like your walk. You sort of...lumber in slow motion."

"I have this theory that my mother relaxed during birth, and I was five minutes late. I've been five minutes late everywhere ever since."

"Hm. Maybe I should adopt that one myself. Even as we speak I'm late calling my sister. She's expecting a baby today. For all I know, I'm an aunt."

"Niece or nephew?"

"No idea. She hasn't had it yet."

"Didn't she get a...what are those tests called?"

"Oh--no, she didn't."

"Didn't she want to know? If I were married and my wife were having a baby, I'd want to know as soon as possible. I'd bring home presents every week, and I'd want to know if they should be pink or blue."

And if you weren't married? "I take it you like children."

"I love children. Don't you?"

"They make me break out in hives." Stop looking at me like I'm growing fangs. "Children make me nervous. They're too vulnerable."

"Everyone's vulnerable."

The eyes. Something in the eyes. "How old are you?"

"Twenty. Why?"

"You're only twenty?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You...look older." Sorry. Didn't mean to offend you.

"So this is the *Gazette* office. I've never read a *Gazette*. Let me see one."

"A good one or a bad one?"

"A good one."

"Okay...here, you can read Justine's poetry. I'll look over your translation." Rend'ring you a service/Makes me feel real nervous/Tryin' to get me into your...scheme....Hm. "You know, this is mostly right." Jumped like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Aus, ausser...Screwed up this part. Still, I'd have handed it in.

"Did she really do this?"

"What?" Oh, Justine's poem. "Yes. The woman left her, though."

"That's really weird."

"Psycho-drama in the *Gazette* office. I'm used to it. An unusually high percentage of my friends are homosexual or bisexual. Makes for odd love triangles."

"Didn't you ever wonder about 'the Why'?"

The Why? "You mean why they're homosexual?"

"Yes."

Actually, I never found it particularly odd. Don't get defensive; he's just asking. "Well...I believe that everyone has bisexual tendencies. There's no such thing as a platonic relationship in the modern sense. To be honest, most of my female homosexual friends were molested or raped or both. They're probably repressing heterosexual attraction. On the other hand, I think heterosexuals respond to social conditioning and deny the other side of themselves."

"That's a side of myself I think I'll deny forever."

"Nothing wrong with that. Better to be the product of society than the product of a bad experience." Batallions of Nazi soldiers just marched before my eyes; perhaps I should retract that last statement. No, he looks relieved. "Easier, anyway." Try being the product of both for a while, babe. "This is all starting to look the same."

"What?--oh, the translation. Yeah, that's how it was looking last night."

"This stuff is so bloody awful. How can you like it?"

"Really I don't like poetry much, so I don't read much of it. I like Goethe because he's one I know pretty well."

"I'll buy that. I generally like the poets I know best. Then, I generally know the poets I like best."

"I like John Donne. I love 'The Flea'."

"Pretty good poem."

"Pretty good? It's a great poem! 'Mark this flea. Mark it well'!"

Too adorable. You are just too adorable. Go home before my body collapses in entropy. Now I've made him nervous. He's leaping about like a gazelle. We should make him our mascot. The *Gazette* gazelle. Looking around for a reason to be walking in circles.

"Why doesn't this bust have a head?"

Found one, did you? "I don't know. It's been that way since I came here. This one doesn't have a head either. I think it's the office theme. Probably representative of the staff."

"I'd love it if someone made a bust of me."

"Don't hold your breath. Or are you planning on becoming famous?"

"I'll find a girlfriend who's a sculptor. She'll make a bust of me."

"Never. You're too fidgety."

"She could do it while I was in bed."

With or without her? Well don't look at me; I draw stick figures. "Are you going to stay in bed for days? You'd get pretty sore." Either way.

"I guess not."

"Man, this poetry is bad."

"Is is making any sense?"

"Well, sure it is. Dative and accusative aren't that hard. You just have to know a few tricks."

"Like what?"

"Well, like here..."

"Let me see...okay, how do you do this part?"

I am a deaf-mute. The synapses in my brain have all bridged over. Five seconds ago I could have answered that. How close is he? Very. I can feel his breath on my neck. Well, don't sit here in silence. Make something up if you have to. Find something really easy..."Like here. The same thing you'd do in English, substituting 'he' and 'him' for 'who' and 'whom.' Just stick in 'ihn' and 'ihm' and see what works."

"That's one of the ones I couldn't figure out."

"Translation is pretty subjective. So is grammar a lot of the time."

"What isn't?"

Good point. "You should trust yourself a little more."

"Thanks. For your help, I mean. I'd better get going so I can work on this."

"All right. See you tomorrow."

"Right."

Thou dost teach the torches to burn bright. Yes? I thought you were leaving. Did I miss something? "Goodbye."

"Bye."

We are in white space. No walls, no roof; just a tile floor. He smiles at me, baring long metal razors, like braces made from scalpel blades. He kisses me. I feel his tongue, liquid warmth in my mouth; I begin to return his kiss. Warm, warm...the liquid is spreading through my mouth; it is my blood. Filling my mouth, running out the corners, flowing down my chin. I struggle; he holds me closer, kisses me harder. I try to swallow. The blood is streaming; it collects in my throat. My hands smear the blood across his face. The white tile is spotted red; another drop; another, like spring rain on snow. The points of red spin around me. I try to scream; he is kissing me. My body begins to sink into blood; he holds it upright; he is kissing me.

"Could we all just get over *The Wasteland*? Could we just get over it?"

"No, we can't just get over it. Can we just get over *Ulysses*? Or don't you like Joyce either?"

"Joyce who?"

"Justine! Hold your tongue!" Well, well. Look who's here.

"Hi, how are you?"

"Not bad. Did you finish your translation?"

"I was just on my way to hand it in. I skipped class this morning to finish it."

"Justine was just in the midst of attacking the canon. Defend James Joyce."

"What? Joyce is great! Haven't you read *Ulysses*?"

"Blech."

"Blech? It's a great book! A pier is a disappointed bridge!"

"Blech. We got our paper topics in class today."

"Yeah, that's what I came over to ask you."

"They're not too awful."

"Good. Well, I have to get this translation in. It's already late."

"Tschüss. All right, Justine. Stop stealing my--" What? Why is she staring at me? Now what is she...John. I thought you left. Well, what are you looking at? Why is everyone staring at me? Am I supposed to break into a song and dance or what? Go hand in your translation. Shoo! "Man, he's weird sometimes."

"He just asked you if you wanted to have a drink afterwards."

"Is this National Be Bizarre Day? What possessed you to say that?"

"That's what he said."

"You're full of it."

"That may be, but he still asked you."

"No, he didn't. I was standing right here. I couldn't possibly have missed it."

"Believe what you like."

"You're serious."

"I'm serious."

"And I totally ignored him?"

"Yes, you did."

"Justine, I am green and scaly with a soft white underbelly and a twelve-foot tail that lashes behind me when I walk."

"Well, you'll just have to ask him out."

"Oh, I get it now. This is a trick."

"Seize the moment."

"You're not fooling me."

"You're right. He said, 'I think you're going to stink afterwards.'"

"I beg your pardon?"

"He didn't say he wanted to have a drink, he said he thought you were going to stink."

"Funny. Humorous. I didn't hear him say anything at all. I didn't even hear noise."

"You're right. He didn't say anything at all."

"Okay! Okay. I'll ask him out. And he'll say he'd rather spend all night hammering his thumb than spend another waking moment in my presence, and I'll know you're lying."

I am on my knees, sifting through the blood with my fingers. It pours from my vagina, slides down my legs. My fingers sift, and bits of tissue stick to them. The blood is half-way up my thighs. Clumps of flesh fall through the cracks between my fingers.

"You look really awful."

"Thank you, Debbie-baby."

"Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

"Not much."

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing productive. Which leaves all the more work to do over break. I need more hours in my day."

"Bizarre positions."

"No thank you, Debbie. Not interested."

"I have this theory about bizarre positions. If you sit in a really strange position, you'll get a creative thought. Like this. Try it."

"No chance."

"Come on, try it."

Oh no, it's her professor. Better warn her. "Debbie—"

"Try it, try it...Dr. Lorden."

"Debbie, I always knew you were about three degrees off; I just didn't know in which direction."

"Really, Dr. Lorden, she's not always this weird; you just manage to catch her...oh well, get up, he's gone. Sorry, Debbie, I tried. Although it's not true; you are always that weird." Is that...? Yes, the walk is unmistakable. "I have to run. See you over break."

"Where are you...oh. Don't chase him, Janine. I don't like him."

"You don't even know him. Besides, I have to ask him out."

"You have to what?"

"Look, he's almost gone. I'll tell you later." I'll never catch him. Am I kidding? The way he walks, I'd catch him if I crawled. Yell something to slow him down. "Wie geht's?" Double-take. Coming back. You're still speaking to me? I wouldn't be speaking to me. Either Justine is lying, or you are a saint.

"Hi, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks, and you?" Man, you look bad.

"I'm exhausted."

"You look a little tired."

"I was up all night studying."

"Exam?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you do?"

"Really well, I think. Here to get your coffee?"

I'm here with him every day, and he hasn't noticed that I don't drink coffee. Perhaps this is a mistake....Okay, here goes. Ask him out for tonight. Good ole St. Patrick's Day. If there's anything you know, it's Irish bars. "Why are you wearing green? You don't have a drop of Irish blood."

"I'm assimilating with the Irish culture."

"Oh brother."

"Tony and I are going out tonight for St. Patrick's Day."

Oh. Never mind. Break, then. "What are you doing over break?"

"Going to Florida."

Batting a thousand. "You look like the type who goes to Florida over spring break."

"It's not that part of Florida. This place is really quiet."

"Oh. Why are you going?"

"It's free."

"Who are you going with?" Hello? Is this a trick question?

"A girl I've been dating a couple of weeks."

Three strikes. Who's out? Funny. I didn't expect that to hurt. Justine is a dead woman. No. Justine would never lie to me. He must have meant the invite as a friendly overture. "Well, have a good time."

"Thanks."

Silence. Say something or leave. Leave. Why aren't I leaving? "So tell me about her."

"Who?"

Oh, please. "This person you've been dating."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, I don't know. Where did you meet her?"

"I don't remember."

"You don't remember? You're a hopeless romantic."

"I'm not a romantic. If I were a romantic, I'd be home pondering despondently."

"I'm not home pondering despondently, and I'm a hopeless romantic." Emphasis on hopeless.

"You are?"

"Yes, I am. And I usually enjoy talking to people in love."

"I'm not in love."

"Obviously."

"There's no such thing."

"Haven't you ever fallen in love?"

"Tell me what love is, and I'll tell you if I've ever been in it."

"Come on. How does one define love?"

"That's what everyone says. They insist that there is such a thing, but they can't tell me what it is. It doesn't exist."

"It does. I've been in love. I was going to get married."

"What happened?"

"He left the country."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"Why not?"

"I figure I lucked out. I figure the powers that be like me, and they got the S.O.B. to leave before I did something stupid. Like marry him."

"Well, then I'm glad. Unless you just tell yourself that because it didn't work out."

"I don't."

"Okay."

"So I can guarantee you that there is such a thing as love."

"Don't you think people get swept off their feet because they want to? Feet out!"

Certainly wasn't the case with me, but believe what you like. Man, you are attractive. Must be one stunning woman, this chick of yours. "Beide haben sogenannte Gefühle: man ruft diese am sichersten dadurch hervor, dass man gewisse Nervenpunkte des Organismus in Funktion setzt. Well, don't look at me; you said it. Actually, Tucholsky said it. You've never studied him?"

"No."

"Oh. Too bad. You and Tucholsky would have been great buddies." Similar modes of thought. Just like Alex was at twenty. Just like Alex...

"Do you think I'll fall in love?"

First time I've ever been able to hold that unblinking stare. "I have absolutely no doubt of it." Your eyes stop at blue. Do not pass this color. Do not collect two hundred dollars. Venetian blinds of the soul. Oh, there you go again. Back and forth, back and forth. Sein Blick ist vom Vorubergehn der Stäbe/So müd geworden, dasser nichts mehr hält...

"There's Tony. You ever go drinking around here?"

"Sometimes."

"Maybe we'll see you. Going tonight?"

"No." I'm going home to ponder despondently.

"Well, maybe we'll see you another time."

"Maybe." Maybe not.

Your fingers take my hair, play with the red waves that fall across your cheek and then hold them back behind my head. Your mouth draws circles on my shoulder. My tongue caresses the tiny lines that do not belong on your young face. Our bodies move against each other, with each other, against each other. Your eyes open wide, close. I curl beside you. Our bodies touch everywhere. My finger traces the soft hair that runs from your navel. You are so beautiful...so beautiful.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Janine. How's it going ?"

"Alex. I have one monster of a hangover, thank you for asking."

"Janine! I thought you didn't do that anymore."

"I felt inspired."

"Oh dear. What gives?"

"Oh, I'm fine now. Except for my head."

"What gave?"

"Alphabetically or chronologically?"

"Chronologically."

"Okay. First I actively sought out John to ask him out, and he told me he was going to Florida with his girlfriend. Then I was in this bar, and some guy--"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. Put on the brakes. You did what?"

"Well, he asked me first. I think."

"He did?"

"I don't know, Al. I'm talking to Justine, and he comes up to ask about a class they're both taking, and then I think he's left, but when I look up he's staring at me like I'm supposed to say something, and then he leaves. According to Justine, he asked me to have a drink with him. I don't know."

"Hold on....Excuse me, guys, but you'll never believe this. This man who Janine finds so attractive that she, like, blushes in his very presence asked her out, and she, like, didn't hear him."

"I can hear everyone laughing, and I'm glad you're all amused."

"And then he told you he has a girlfriend?"

"Something like that."

"That's weird."

"Well, I don't know that he really asked me out."

"Justine wouldn't lie about something like that."

"I know. But I don't know if he 'asked me out' asked me out, if you know what I mean. As I said, I didn't hear it."

"But Justine thought he did?"

"So she implied."

"Maybe he and his girlfriend aren't serious."

"Definitely not. He talks about her like she's his dog."

"Sounds like a jerk."

"Actually, Al, he reminds me an awful lot of you."

"Of me?"

"Of you when you were twenty. You remember those fights we'd get into about how you treated people, and you would call me spineless, and I would call you hateful?"

"But Janine, you were right. I was hateful."

"Much as I'd like to disagree...But he's like you in other ways, too. He has that...enduring quality. I mean, you may have been hateful, but here we are. I don't know, Al. Most of my friends think he's out to screw me over. But I don't think so."

"If he does, I'll, like, get a gang together and we'll go to his house with crowbars."

"Hm. I really don't think he will. Don't ask me why. He is sort of morally bankrupt."

"How so?"

"Oh, got drunk and wrecked his car, 'borrowed' something from his ex-girlfriend, that sort of thing."

"Sounds like he has edged over moral bankruptcy and fallen into stupidity."

"And just what were you doing when you were twenty, my dear Alex?"

"Oh. Never mind. Sounds like a great guy, Jan! He's only twenty?"

"I think it's been a long twenty years. Anyway, who says drinking doesn't solve your problems? I slept like a rock, got up this morning with my brain sloshing around in my head, and said, 'To hell with celibacy. I'm

fighting for him.'"

"You? Madame Shrinking Violet is going to fight for someone?"

"Well, not with fisticuffs or anything. He can keep the bimbo if he likes. I want him."

"You must really like this guy."

"I really like this guy."

"Ah, Janine. Your usual healthy breakfast?"

"Indeed. Coffee and a cigarette."

"Your daily vegetables: coffee beans and leafy greens. Hello, Debbie. So long, Debbie. What's her problem?"

"Oh, she and I were out drinking Friday night, and I tottered over to John, wrapped my arms around him, and drooled drunkenly on his shoes."

"Did you really?"

"Yes. Well, I'm exaggerating, Justine. But only slightly."

"Why is it any of her business?"

"Oh, he's too young and too stupid and too charming, and I'm too vulnerable right now, and he and I are from two different worlds, yacketa, yacketa."

"That's silly. He's a bedmate, not a soulmate."

"Justine! He'll hear you. Honestly, Justine--what a terrible thing to say."

"Isn't it true?"

"No! Well, yes. But only because the word 'commitment' sends me screaming from the room. I am genuinely fond of the man. Bedmate makes him sound like a gigolo. I'd prefer to think of him as...a playmate."

"Bedmate, playmate. Don't bandy words with me, Janine."

"In point of fact, he is neither, so keep your voice down."

"What happened Friday night?"

"Friday night? Oh. Nothing. Debbie got irritable and we left. John's not ticklish, if you're interested. That's supposed to mean he's lousy in bed."

"Hi, how are you?"

Mind you, I always thought that was an old wives' tale.

Our hipbones crack together with every thrust. You move off of me, use your hands to pin my hips as you push inside me, over and over. My breathing is rapid and shallow; it deepens, crescendoes. I begin to scream. You move again; your eyes are wide and blue; you grasp my shoulders and cover my mouth with yours. I feel your hips jolting my body. You put your hand over my mouth, but you can still hear me, and I can still feel you.

"I've had it with this place. I vote we drop out of school and run away together."

"Where?"

"Hm. Near the ocean. I always wanted to live near the ocean."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Swim all day, drink all night, dance till dawn..." Make love on the beach. Very romantic. You hate romance. Screw in the surf. Like that better?

"I don't think I want to drop out of school."

"Okay. We'll go this summer."

"Okay."

Okay? Are you serious? I'm serious. "That is, if your girlfriend won't mind."

"Oh, I bagged her this weekend."

"Oh!" Egad! I should feel elated, shouldn't I? "I'm sorry." Are you sorry? You're not sorry. "What happened?"

"She was just getting...really paranoid. Everything I said made her paranoid."

In other words, she was afraid you were going to 'bag' her, so you did.

"Besides, I've met someone else I'd like to get close to."

Oh, it's Mister Euphemism to you. I will not ask who. "Who?" Tsk. Bravo. Say, 'None of your business, bitch.' At least say something.

"Her name's Maria."

"As in Rainer dash Rilke?"

"Yeah, that must be the attraction."

"Well, if things don't work out with Maria, you can run away with me."

"I can do that anyway."

"Janine!"

Wha--oh, Debbie. Go away. "Yes?"

"Do you know anything about Milton?"

"A bit."

"I don't understand this 'Hail holy light' business."

"Oh, that. Well, Milton thought that, since he was blind, he was 'irradiated by an inner and far superior light.' Inner sight. God's light. Whatever. Blindness had replaced virginity as his means of tapping the Heavenly Muse. Well, that's my opinion, anyway. There are those who disagree."

"But why?"

"Why do they disagree?"

"Why blindness?"

"I don't know. Probably because he went blind and wanted to believe that. Wear a blindfold tomorrow and see if Apollo boxes your ears."

"Why did he replace virginity with blindness?"

"Maybe he wanted to get laid."

"Janine!"

"Good grief, woman, do I look like John Milton? Get a Ouija board and ask him. Dig up Freud while you're at it. I can only guess, and you can guess just as well. You remember John; John, Debbie."

"Hi, how are you?"

"Oh, I have to get this paper in, and I skipped Dr. Lorden's class today because I just didn't know what to write, and--oh no! Here comes Dr. Lorden now! I have to hide. Quick! Where can I hide?"

Where can you hide? You can run, but you can't hide. Oh, I do not believe..."Debbie, take your coat off of your head. Debbie! Good grief. Good. Pretend you're a rock. We'll have a picnic lunch on your back."

"Dr. Lorden's laughing at her."

"He usually is. Debbie, come back here--I spend all my time with this woman telling her to come back here. One would think she was a pet. Debbie, come back. He's gone."

"Are you sure?"

"No, I'm lying--yes, I'm sure. Never mind. Go away. Go write your paper. Goodbye. Goodbye.... She is so odd sometimes."

"She seems nice."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I like her. She's not one of those people who hangs around, and you really want to say, 'Go away'...you know?"

"Well, just let me know if I'm ever one of them."

"John!" Man, he's not joking. "John, that's never going to happen."

"Well, just promise to let me know if it does."

"I will if you will."

"Okay."

I don't believe this. "Really, the only way a person that I already like can end the friendship is lie to me. I won't tolerate being lied to." What's that look for?

"Why would--I mean, what..."

"I don't know, John. Some people are just liars by nature."

"Look: I made a square out of a round. It's for you."

What the...? A can, dented in on four sides. That's unique. No, thank you. Knowing me, I'd keep it. "Thanks all the same, I'll pass."

"It's a gesture. That's what life's all about: making gestures."

"I'll remember the gesture. You can keep the can."

"My mother would have taken it."

Too adorable. You are just too adorable...."What, are you leaving?"

"Yeah, I gotta get going."

"Come to think of it, so do I. I'm late. Justine will have my head."

"Tell her you met an incredibly charming man after class, and you just had to talk to him."

"Funny, I was going to tell her exactly that." Well, you could say goodbye. Okay, I'm going...No, you're not leaving. Just walking in circles again. Fine, I'm waiting. What are you looking at? Don't do this to me. Don't make me roll the universe toward some overwhelming question....All right. I am calm. I am happy. Ask me out. Okay, don't. Ask me to go home with you. Fine, skip the preliminaries: kiss me. Now. Before I grow old. Fuck you, I'm leaving. "See you tomorrow." Man, did your eyes just turn blue. Not what you were waiting for? Well, what the heck were you waiting for? Godot. Maria. Maria...I just met a girl named Maria....Men. I dunno. When you kissed Robert Mitchum/la da da da something something..."Good afternoon, Justine."

"Shut up and sit down. We're a week behind."

"Okey-dokey. When you kissed Robert Mitchum..."

"What's with you?"

"It's a beautiful day! The sun is glorious, the birds are chirping..."

"I can see we're going to get a lot of work out of you today."

"You know, I'd have bet money that he was going to kiss me. Or ask me out or do something. But he just stood there and smiled at me like a

lummox."

"Just as I suspected. I'm not letting you talk to John before work anymore."

"Probably just as well. I think I've forgotten how."

"To work? Obviously."

"Oh, stop being so cranky, Justine. It'll get in."

"I thought you'd forgotten how."

"Die."

"Work."

"Justine?"

"What now?"

"I'm frightened."

"Wait, wait. Here's another one about a lost soul in a rainstorm. 'My soul is battered by the wind/Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned.' "

"No way!"

"I think it's lovely."

"Honestly, Justine. Does it have a sex scene? That seems to be the 'in' thing this semester."

"Hold on...yes indeedy. 'As she gave out cries of pleasure and pain'--I know you women are into the pleasure and pain--"

"We women? Oh, we women who sleep with men. I hardly qualify. Besides, it's not exactly an odd character trait, Justine."

"No, only a foolish one. Pleasure and pain my eye. The man gets off on the idea that he's penetrating the woman."

"Let's not make sweeping generalizations. Although it is true that my ex-fiancé liked to refer to his penis as the weapon that God gave him."

"There you go. And speaking of your ill-chosen lovers..."

Whoa! That's the worst knife-in-the-back look yet. Wade on by, my subterranean godling.

"What's eating him?"

"Don't look at me."

"I know it isn't you. Were it you, his mood would be considerably lightened."

"Justine! My celibate ears!"

"Your ears, maybe."

"All of me. I'm beginning to think permanently, too. He's been like that all week."

"After your intimate moment together Monday?"

"There was nothing intimate about it. It was merely awkward."

"Was he really going to kiss you?"

"No, I don't think so. I thought so at the time. I don't know what he was doing, Justine. He just stared at me like I was supposed to break into song...and dance...Justine."

"What?"

"Justine, I am green and scaly with a soft white underbelly and a twelve-foot tail that lashes behind me when I walk."

"We all know that."

"I think I really blew it this time."

You should always be in water. Kelp instead of laurel. The sun draws those tiny lines on your face, blanches your eyes. Like opaque chlorinated water. Makes you look old. Pale. Cold. Human. "Have a seat."

"I want to sit on this side. Move your shit."

Retract the part about old. My body hurts. Nerves. I feel like a wound coil. "I have a question for you."

"What kind of question?"

"Well, if I'm wrong, kind of a weird question. Did you say something to me on Monday that I didn't respond to?"

"No! I mean, how could you have? Monday...what was Monday? Your problem is, you think in too much detail. What did I do Monday? I went to class--did I go to class?"

Is that a yes?

"Why are you worried about it?"

Oh, what kind of dumb-ass question...Calm. I am calm. I may look like a turtle trying to pull its limbs into its shell, but I am calm. Why, why. My wrists ache. "I just wanted to make sure I hadn't offended you."

Don't worry about it, I forgive you? Or don't worry about it, I plan on emotionally absenting myself from you for the rest of my natural life? "You haven't spoken to me all week."

"When? When did I not speak to you?"

"John, you're being deliberately obtuse. Yes, you spoke to me. You have been civil."

"It wasn't intentional."

The civility? "Look, you can talk to me now, or I can follow you around the rest of the semester bugging you."

"Don't waste your time."

I am not hurt. I am not angry. This is my fault. Perhaps another route: "Going drinking tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for someone."

"Maria?"

"Yeah. She only exists on Friday evenings. Then she runs down the front steps of the bar and leaves a glass slipper. I'm afraid to walk out with her; I'm afraid she'll turn into something horrible."

"Like what?"

"Like a nagging bitch."

Open my veins. In drear-nighted December. I think I have to redefine my terms. Excrutiatingly beautiful.

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes/In shape no bigger than an agate stone...Justine. Who's with her? Debbie's sister.

"Janine! I'm so glad to see you!"

You are? "What can I do for you, Lila-baby? Need someone to talk to?"

"No, no. Have some champagne!"

What the hell. I hope they expel me.

"If I were an artist, I would paint your portrait."

"Lila Rembrandt. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Leaning in the archway, coffee and cigarette, staring into the rain with that soulful look in your eyes."

"I was just thinking that I look like one of those sappy Maxwell House commercials."

"Justine, wouldn't Janine make a fabulous portrait?"

"I think I'll write a poem about it. What are you doing out here, Janine?"

"I couldn't take the noise in the coffee room anymore."

"What noise?"

"Precisely."

"I saw you talking to John earlier."

"Mm. I asked him out."

"What? Again?"

"Well, Justine, I told him I was going to bug him the rest of the semester. I never make idle threats."

"And he said?"

" 'No.' Can you believe that? I expected him to say no, but he actually said, 'No.' 'Want to go downtown tonight?' 'No.' I was like, 'No'? You're supposed to say, 'I'm so sorry; I'm washing my hair tonight.' "

"Why do you bother?"

"I'm waiting for him to say, 'Excuse me, I think you're really inappropriate.' "

"Who's this John character?"

"You met him briefly, Lila. He's in Justine's class. Tall, blonde ..."

"Oh. The pretty one."

"That's him. Man of wax. You know, it's really unfair. I never used to drink coffee. If he was going to give me his vices, the least he could have done was slept with me."

"I think you intimidate him."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're fabulous!"

"Oh. That must be it. So what are we celebrating?"

"Oh, I don't know. Justine just finished her last class, I just took an exam, and you...well, just because you're fabulous!"

"Danke. Prosit."

"Anyway, I suggest you forget this John character. I'm very disillusioned with men."

Are you now, Lila-baby?

"I was never illusioned."

"Justine, Justine. I'm not 'illusioned.' " April is the cruelest month. "That's why I...like him."